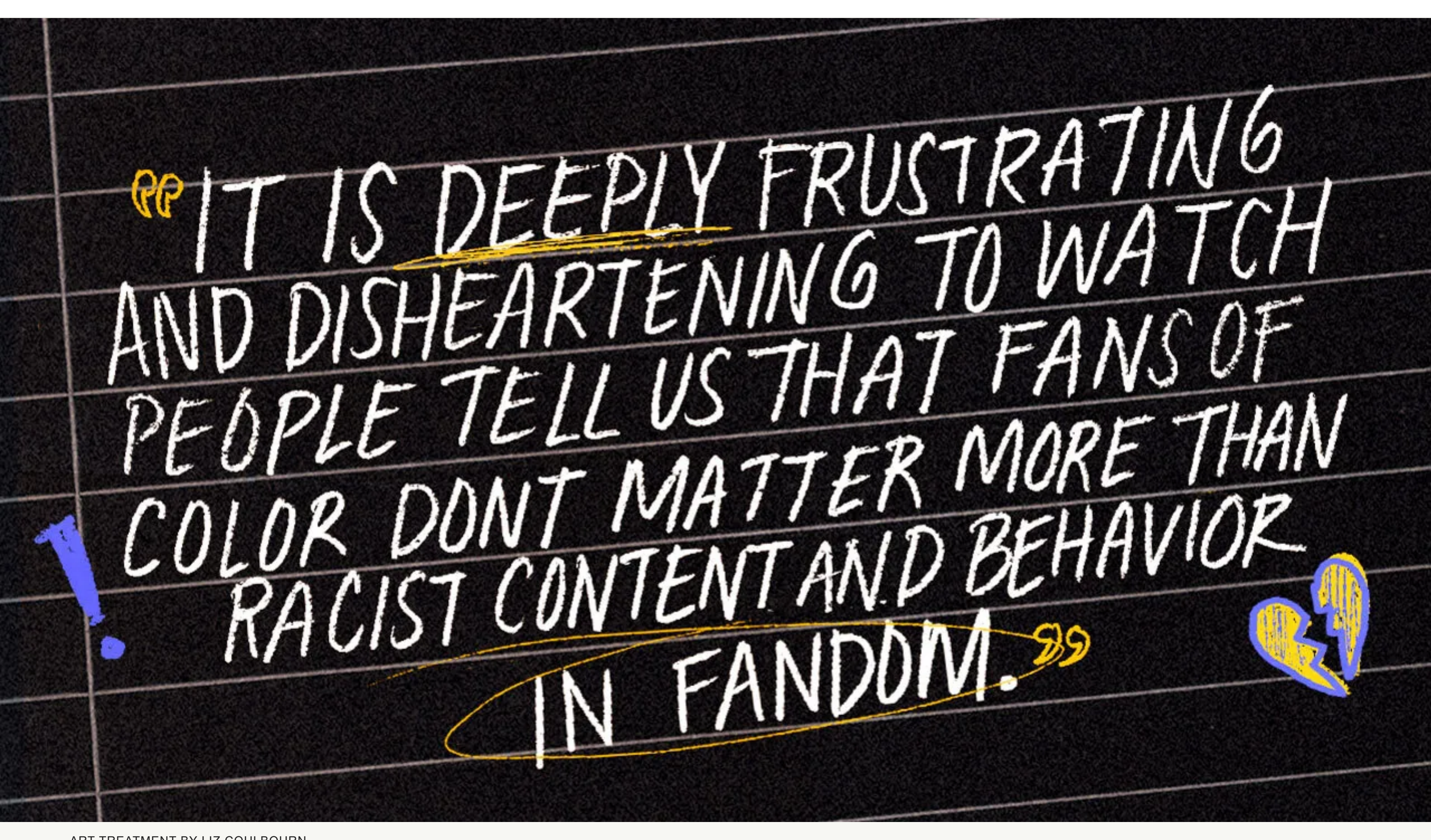

ART TREATMENT BY LIZ COULBOURN

Culture

As #EndOTWRacism Fights for AO3 Policy Changes, Fandom Racism Bubbles to the Surface

Fan Service is a column by pop culture and fandom writer Stitch that looks at the highs and lows of fandom, and unpacks how what we do online, and for fun, connects back to the way we think about the offline world.

BY STITCH

MAY 30, 2023

"Diversity consultants are not only wastes of money they are people you pay to create race problems where there weren't any," writes a commenter on the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (AO3). "Anyone even suggesting they be hired should be driven out of the public square and publicly tarred and feathered."

The comment was left in response to a Black fan talking about how imperative the need for a diversity consultant is for AO3 and its parent nonprofit, the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), on an article announcing the sudden departure of the organization's director, Heather McGuire. It is one of several violently negative responses to #EndOTWRacism, a grassroots movement within queer and feminist fandom to hold AO3 and the OTW accountable for the promise they made, in 2020, to address the documented instances of racist content and behavior in and on its websites, as well as AO3's lacking offensive content policy. (The archive's "maximum inclusiveness" policy says anything goes as long as it's legal, and the gist of the offensive content policy is that nothing is too offensive to remove.) The OTW declined to comment for this story.

The negative responses to #ENDOTWRacism have been varied but vicious. Some involve people promising to block and shun every single person who participates in the movement — even when a person is just asking AO3 to finally do the thing its leadership said it would three years ago. Others insist that this is some grand pro-censorship plot, comparing fans of color to book burners, nazis, and of course "antis" in fandom – ill-defined as always. Some people are bookmarking stories linked with the hashtag and marking them as "deformed." (I supposed they wanted to write them off as "defaced.") Aside from the wish that we should be "tarred and feathered" for wanting something the AO3 itself has agreed it needs, another post on the site called fans of color privileged and said that they clearly needed to be slapped more as children.

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In sum, we're watching this small fandom movement build momentum alongside a rise of open racist rage directed towards fans of color for trying to speak about something that is important to us: an unfulfilled promise that could help protect us in one of our biggest shared fandom spaces. Black Americans in the fandom space are subject to the same sort of racist language and abuse that exists offline from alt-right conservatives. As with the rest of the Internet space and internet culture at large, people of color are left behind and left out, subject to racism and punishment for talking about what we're experiencing.

If you position yourself as opposed to anti-racism in a space or situation, you are racist. If you only support anti-racism measures from people who will talk how you want, say what you want, and hold the hands of racists in fandom *like you want*... you are a racist. If you're lying about fans of color you don't know and have never spoken to or read in good faith in order to devalue their work or comments on racism in fandom, you are a racist. If you are derailing, dismissing, and undermining anti-racist efforts in fandom because you think fandom will be irreparably damaged and that, somehow, AO3 will collapse under the weight of being judged for a thing that fans of color have been talking about for its entire lifetime... you are racist and so is fandom. To flip the Ibram X. Kendi quote around: the opposite of "anti-racist" is "racist," and if you refuse to be anti-racist in fandom or anywhere else because you don't like the tone, methods, or identities of the people of color speaking on something that has actively harmed them? You're... you've guessed it: a racist.

There is no getting around that and no point in softening my words to be gentle with someone who thinks that anti-racism is directly opposed to the values of queer/feminist "transformative" fandom — and will actively harm and lie about fans of color to make their points. Fandom is racist, has always been racist, and is now getting worse right in front of our salads due to an increasing wave of overt white supremacy masked as anti-censorship and max inclusivity.

In conversations about the ways that free speech has been misunderstood and later co-opted and weaponized against vulnerable and marginalized people, philosopher Karl Popper's "paradox of tolerance," developed in the 1940s as a response to Nazism, is used to explain how limitless tolerance of every idea causes intolerant ideas to emerge and grow more reputable.

What we're willing to tolerate says volumes about who is allowed to speak and be listened to in a given space. A max inclusiveness policy that prioritizes content regardless of how genuinely offensive and oppressive it can be to marginalized and vulnerable people such as Black and brown fans in fandom shows that we are not included in the safe space of fandom... which brings us to the idea of fandom as a "Nazi bar." The Nazi bar analogy comes courtesy of Michael B. Tager, who shared an analogy about what to do about Nazis in your bars back in 2020:

> *"You have to nip it in the bud immediately. These guys come in and it's always a nice, polite one period and you serve them because you don't want to cause a scene. And then they become a regular and after a while they bring a friend. And that dude is cool too. And then they bring friends and the friends bring friends and they stop being cool and then you realize, oh shit, this is a Nazi bar now. And it's too late because they're entrenched and if you try to kick them out, they cause a problem so you have to shut them down."*

The comparison broadly applies to niche social groups like the different fandoms we're in. These are places where online radicalization is introduced to vulnerable people looking for something to believe in. It can start with something as simple as a meme, or the insistence that fans of color are only pretending to care about anti-racism in order to take away your porn.

When it comes to fandom, we've seen decades of people told to just accept racism and other forms of bigotry in other fans's behavior as well as the content they produce. Work by racists — including explicitly and purposefully racist content – has always been defended in these spaces. But when it comes to work about racism or fans of color simply complaining on their social media? Those fans are quickly shown the door or harassed until they no longer feel like being in fandom. If you don't protect fans of color — and actively protect racists who aren't even bothering to hide what they are — what does that say about the current state of fandom?

It's never been clearer to me than with the vicious, violent responses to #EndOTWRacism that queer fandom is a (somewhat fandom-themed) Nazi bar already — even before we look at the historical and current support for Nazi/Holocaust AUs across fandom. The white supremacists are here, and they've *been* here. They help write website policies, they send nasty anonymous messages to fans of color reminding us of our place, they're calling the cops on people like me over ships, and they are being defended, at every single step of the way, because they are seen as more valuable to queer/feminist fandom than fans of color who want to escape into fandom as well.

We covered this last year: queer fans of color are often told to choose between our identities as fans, as queer people/women, as people of color. We are not allowed to be fans that demand and receive the same treatment as others. We're othered within fandom until we can be useful... usually by upholding what is an increasingly overt white supremacist status quo in nominally queer spaces. If we speak up and speak out against racist behaviors or fanworks, that gives the rest of fandom carte blanche to harass us until we leave, or worse.

Journalism and scholarship exist that cover some appearances of "alt-right" radicalization in fandom . However, next to none of it outside of my own and that of Dr. Rukmini Pande's work looks at the way queer/feminist fandom is in the middle of a white supremacist radicalization where racist behavior and content get disguised as progressive because they're in service of surface-level feminism/pro-queer and kink.

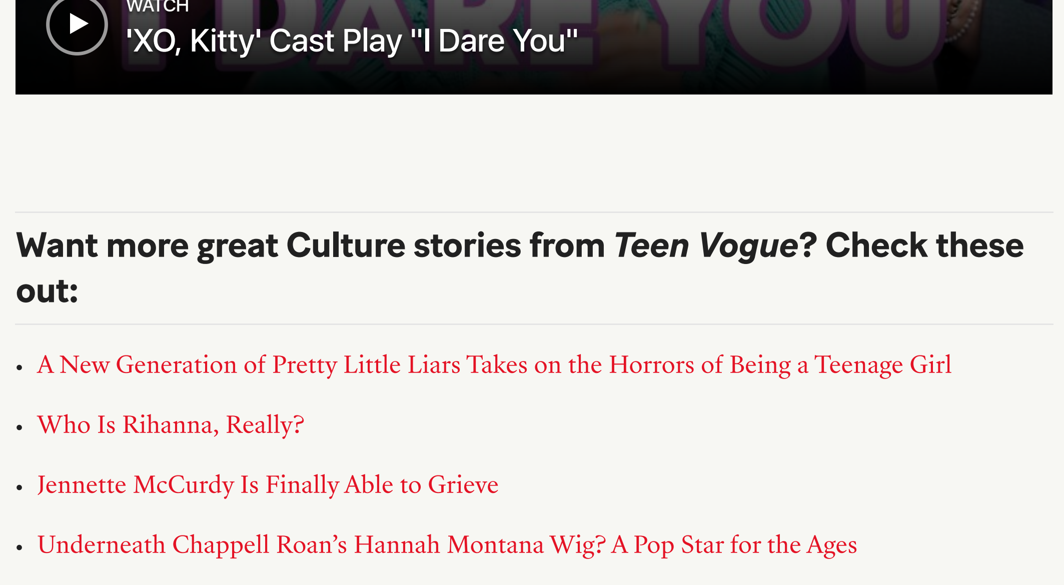
Under these radical ideologies masked as progressive politics, it is feminist to frame John Boyega as a potential rapist and abuser over a joke about *his* pairing in *Star Wars*. It's feminist for those same fans to go after Rahul Kohli and promise to blacklist him. It's feminist to defend white women's desire in fandom by harassing fans of color off of the internet.People are openly *being* violently racist to fans of color, and they have the nerve to think they're somehow *better* than "dudebros" in fandom. Even as they use the same co-opted social justice language in order to claim that it's not racism, it's about censorship in fandom.

We're witnessing this phenomenon online, and we have to name it, to document it, if we ever want to make a path through it. We're watching people of color be called "entitled" and "privileged" for wanting a fandom space branded as the Archive of *OUR* Own to live up to that for all of us. We are actively positioned as viruses infecting fandom, as anti fans, accused of making problems where they didn't exist, even though we have decades of fandom history that proves these queer/feminist spaces have *never* been good about race and racism.

Something like #EndOTWRacism exists alongside the spirit of fandom activism that brought us Fandom Trumps Hate, only this is a small movement asking fans to speak up and say something about how the OTW hasn't lived up to the promises they made to make the fandom spaces they manage a little safer for fans of color. If we want the wider world to be better, then it's okay to be an activist in fandom. But the second fans of color want fandom itself to be better, to let us have more equal treatment and fewer double standards, then we're outsiders, antis, and bullies? Okay. Sure.

It is deeply frustrating and disheartening to watch people tell us that fans of color don't matter more than racist content and behavior in fandom. Fans of color deserve better, and gently demanding it from a single fandom space that promised to do so but keeps dragging its heels isn't anti-fandom. It's our right to speak up and be heard. If you've got a problem with that, yes even if you're a POC too, you just might be racist. Work on that, perhaps, but get out of the way while you do.

Stitch will continue discussing the many layers of fandom in Fan Service, published on Teen Vogue. You can follow their work on Stitch's Media Mix and on Twitter.



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